

GMU Vision

Shotgun shooting sports are growing by leaps and bounds especially at the high school and college levels. For instance, Bloomberg.com reported in a July 9, 2015 article titled *“U.S. High Schools Embrace Shooting as Hot New Sport”* that trap shooting is the fastest growing sport in Minnesota high schools while other sources report that nearly 300 colleges and universities offer some type of shooting program. Shooting sports at the college level are not new as some have programs dating back into the 1800's, but there has been a recent surge in interest and participation. The wave of interest has spread to a community not often associated with firearms – young people with disabilities. This is good news since that is a community with a dire need for opportunities and outlets for physical expression. According to Disabled-world.com, the June 2014 Active People Survey out of England found that “72.1% of disabled people take part in no sport or physical activity, compared to 47.8% of non-disabled people”. Combining this sobering statistic with the cultural expansion of the shooting sports has inspired the rejuvenation of the Adaptive Shooting Program of the Education and Training Division at the National Rifle Association (NRA). The NRA has a long history of inclusion when it comes to people of all ages, races and abilities so it was no great stretch to boost their flagship program for people with disabilities.

With a new National Manager heading up the Adaptive Shooting Program, the NRA was poised to blast away the barriers between people with disabilities and the burgeoning shooting sports community. The opening salvo was to establish a partnership with the Association of College Unions International (ACUI). ACUI is an international non-profit educational organization founded in 1914 with a mission to build campus communities through collaboration between college union and student activities professionals. To achieve their combined goal, the NRA and ACUI determined that a network of hand selected and specifically trained coaches and competitors would be best to introduce people in wheelchairs to the shotgun sports at the college level. Since the NRA has approximately 4,204 shotgun coaches and ACUI represents nearly 500 learning institutions, there would be no shortage of talent and experience from which to draw. The actual challenge was narrowing the search to a manageable number. Of the 500 schools affiliated with ACUI, approximately 250 have existing shotgun shooting teams. Out of that 250 one school stands out. George Mason University (GMU) has a shotgun sports team. That is a significant understatement. GMU doesn't just have a team. They are one of the most highly decorated trap and skeet shooting teams in the country with more than 10 national championships to their credit. The team was founded in the early 1980's and is the second oldest club sport at GMU with the oldest being rugby. So it only makes sense that George Mason University should join with the NRA and ACUI under the umbrella of the Adaptive Shooting Program to create a shotgun sports team for people in wheelchairs.

Bringing three large multi-faceted organizations together for one purpose is a challenge to say the least. The fact that the NRA and ACUI had an existing relationship made that connection relatively smooth. The test would be bringing GMU into the fold. To do so would require cautious optimism and scientific attention to detail. The first step would require establishing a working relationship with the Office of Disability Services and to do that you must first meet with the Assistant Dean of Students and Director of Disability Services, Linn Jorgenson, Ed.D. When meeting with Dr. Jorgenson you will not skirt the issues or provide soft, unfocused answers to her pointed questions. She cares about the program and

the students she represents so she required ironclad assurances that her student's safety and wellbeing would remain the top priority. The National Rifle Association's legendary commitment to safety is known throughout the hunting, defensive and shooting sports communities. You will not read through the first chapter of an NRA publication or sit through the first 5 minutes of an NRA course without learning the three cardinal rules of gun safety. More importantly, you will not earn the right to call yourself an NRA Instructor without knowing – and flawlessly adhering to – all eleven firearm safety rules. Safety compliance cannot be over stressed when handling firearms. An inability to safely handle and operate a firearm is an absolute contraindication to participation in any shooting sport or activity. In many instances additional training and/or adaptations to the size, weight or caliber of the gun will enable a student to achieve the required standard of safety, but the safety rules themselves will never be modified or adapted. With the dedication to safety firmly established, Dr. Jorgenson next needed to know about the quality of the training that her students would be receiving.

The excellence and depth of NRA training programs is as well known as its tradition of safety. So tightly entwined are the two, that it's hard to determine which element was the catalyst in the reaction that formed the NRA in 1871. GMU's test pilots for the Adaptive Shooting Program Shotgun Club probably won't know the answer either, but they will benefit from 245 years of world class experience. By combining the latest in technology with nearly 7,400 coaches and trainers around the world covering all age groups, shooting disciplines and abilities, the NRA is the most prepared organization in the world to responsibly escort these newly minted competitors into the shooting sports. It should be noted here that the objective is not to stop at a shooting club for intramural competition. If a competitor in a wheelchair has the skill and desire, he or she could very likely be trying out for a spot on George Mason's coveted skeet and trap team.

Armed with Dr. Jorgenson's support and a boost of enthusiasm from her assistant Ariel, the next step was decided. The GMU Office of Disability Services will survey its students to determine if sufficient interest exists to justify the investments of energy, time and resources. It is anticipated that there will be some trepidation on behalf of the students. Maybe they were rightly cautioned about the dangers of firearms as a small child but never revisited the topic as they matured. Perhaps because of their abilities they have heard more about the things they can't or shouldn't do rather than the things that they can and should. Either way, the diverse team of educators, competitors and health care professionals assembled by the NRA, ACUI and GMU will be there to help them make an informed decision. Hopefully the survey will yield six to twelve candidates with an interest in shooting American Trap for the NRA Adaptive Shooting Program's shotgun club who, like the first astronauts in the movie ***The Right Stuff***, will be trained and tested. Unlike the movie's heroes however, all of these pioneers will succeed.

Ariel with the Office of Disability Services, a former competitor in the shot put, will be the first point of contact for students interested in the program. As part of the preparation for this endeavor, she will have received training on the safe operation of a typical shotgun used in shooting American trap and will have shot a few rounds of trap herself. This will enable her to speak from a foundation of fresh knowledge and experience about what the students can expect. The students will then receive instruction from the NRA coaching staff which will include handling inert shotgun simulators. These simulations are often referred to as 'blue guns' because they are made of a hard rubber in a dark shade

of blue. These blue guns are weighted and balanced to match a typical shotgun and will permit the coaching staff to evaluate not only a student's ability to handle the weight of the gun but also their adherence to the cardinal rules of gun safety. A limitation in strength, endurance or coordination may be identified at this point and may be remediated by continued practice with the blue guns or possibly through an individualized exercise program. As long as the limitation does not compromise safety, the student will progress to the next level of training involving laser guns. That's right – laser guns. The NRA has at its disposal a state of the art shooting simulator that allows a student to train without the risk of a fired projectile, noise or recoil of a real firearm. This device utilizes a red laser similar to the pointer used during lectures or presentations to indicate 'shot' placement. This laser when paired with a reactive video image projected onto a screen provides the student with a safe and unique transition between training with blue guns and fully operational firearms. Some students may find that this is as far as they wish to go with the program while others will be energized to move to the next and stage. The last step is for the student to graduate to live fire exercises at a local trap and skeet field. While this may be the final step, it is but the very beginning of a long journey. Will some of the pioneering NRA Adaptive Shooting Program's Shotgun Club be content with this brief introduction to the sport – certainly. Will some catch a spark from that original reaction in 1871 and fan it into a lifelong flame for training, competition and appreciation for the shotgun shooting sports – we hope so.